C. AGRICULTURAL CUSTOMS.

I. *The Agricultural Year.*

137 221 At the season which is called *shimumu*, the little heat, that is to say in July, when the warm weather begins, the nkuhlu puts forth new shoots. Though rain is still far off, the mahogany and sala trees become covered with leaves of a wonderfully delicate green. A kind of Composita (the Helychrisum parviflorum, shirimbyati), which is wide-spread on the sandy dunes, blossoms all over the country ; a beautiful lily (Crinum Forbesii) will expand its splendid white and pink flowers : the *winter* (bushika) has passed away : soon the *hlobo* (summer) will come.

412 221 462 When the Ronga woman notices these signs, she picks up her hoe (shikomo) and starts for the hills, or for the marshes. Her husband has already repaired the implement for her, at home. If the handle was worn out, he has cut a branch of nkonono, (Terminalia sericea), which is the wood invariably used for the purpose, and has shaped it so that one end is thicker than the other ; in this thick end a hole is bored, while the iron hoe head is heated in the fire : the head has, at its base, a long iron point which is inserted nearly red-hot into the hole, burning its way in, and thus solidly fixing the two parts together. This method of fixing on the handle is called ku lumela shikomo. The Ronga hoe has a very short handle, sometimes not more than two feet in length. The Transvaal Thongas use handles three to four feet long. The woman has now nothing to do but to work hard, her lord and master having duly accomplished his share of the labour.

241 221 It is the end of August. Two or three months must still elapse before the rainy season sets in. This period of the year is devoted to a two-fold work : the clearing of fresh land and the cultivation of marshes.

The *clearing of fresh land*, ku tlhaba lisindje (Ro.), ku khatsha

241 (Dj.), in the bush which has never yet been cultivated, or has
221 been lying fallow for a long time, is very hard work indeed!
313 Beginning in the early morning the woman cuts down the small trees with her axe (khaula, dji-ma); if the stems are too large she lights a fire at their base and leaves them to burn until they fall. Natives have not the slightest idea of the value of trees, if

Tilling the fields near Makulane (Maputju country). *Phot. D. Lenoir.*

these trees do not bear edible fruit, and destroy whole forests without any compunction. As previously mentioned, the labourer spares only the nkanye, mphimbi, nkuhlu, etc., and sometimes the mimosa parasol (gowane, Albizzia fastigiata) which provides a beneficial shade for the maize. Then she breaks the soil with her hoe and piles up in heaps the weeds (bibi, dji-ma) and bushes which she has uprooted, leaving them to dry before burning them.
[538] This is a long job and requires great patience. The old adage says very truly:

U nga bone bibi u ku ndji timele. (Don't waste your time in looking at your heaps of rubbish, and fancying that your work is done!)

241 This work continues all through the months of August, September
221 and October.

Cultivation of Marshes (tjhobo, dji-ma). If the woman has already tilled plenty of ground on the hill, during the previous years, she will devote these three spring months to the cultivation of the wet hollows near the lakes, between the dunes. The gardens in the marsh are called *shiramba* or *mashamba* and are very different from those on the hills called *masimo* (1).

I will now describe those which I saw in the Rikatla depression. The middle of the hollow is a marsh filled with long Papyrus (bungu), slender Typha (papala, dji-ma) or reeds (lihlanga). They are cut, uprooted ; small canals are dug, in which the water collects. The roots and stems are piled in heaps, some three feet high, called *psibibi*, but they are not burnt. They are left to decay, and shilutane pumpkin seeds are sown in them, high enough to avoid putrefaction in the water. The soil is a wet black mud very favourable to the cultivation of rice. So a small plot a few square feet is sown, a *shingubya*, and, when the seeds have sprouted, they will be planted out all round. It seems that planting out has been known and practised for a long time by the Makaneta people who have large plantations of rice. Mealies are also sown in this region, in the spots where it is somewhat less wet : they will ripen one month earlier than those on the hill. The great pity is that the papyrus marsh is full of small birds called *nkapa* (mu-mi), which pluck out the tiny sprouts of mealies as soon as they appear and eat the half rotted grain at the roots. So children and women must scare away these marsh birds during these months, as they will the sparrows of the hills later on.

On the raised edge of the canals sweet potatoes are planted, not the tuber, but growing stems, which will bear fruit much earlier than those on the hill. Where water has entirely disappeared, manioc is also planted in the hollows and seems to prosper well. In early November the pumpkins of the *psibibi* will be fully developed and their leaves will provide the mistress

(1) Nsimu, cl. yi-tin, becomes in the plural masimu, cl.dji-ma ; it is one of the few exceptions met with in Thonga grammar.

of the garden with a good vegetable until the first-fruits themselves ripen and furnish a more substantial food. 241 221

When the rains commence, sometimes as early as September, but generally later, it is *time to begin the regular sowing*. Everybody then starts for himself, because, although the fields tilled by the mother are the largest, every member of the family has tilled his own : the husband has his *mpashu* (I. p. 337) and each girl has her plot.

The Native idea is that every owner of a field must sow all principal cereals and vegetables in his garden, except peas, on account of their taboo. So, in a line on the border, are planted sweet potatoes and manioc. Mealie seeds are sown at a given distance from each other, alternating with Kafir corn and sorghum, and in between are planted ground nuts and beans. Watch how the mistress of the field proceeds to sow her maize : she walks along with short steps, at each one digging up a shovelful of well tilled earth, and planting in the holes three or four grains of maize, which she carefully covers over. The work is done in haste so as to take advantage of the last rains. The *lisindje* is first sown ; then begins the hasty tilling of the old fallow fields (pula, dji-ma). The crop is not likely to be so plentiful as that obtained from virgin soil, but the same fields can be used for three or four consecutive years before they become exhausted.

Natives have no idea of *fertilising the ground* in any way whatever ; at the most they may take advantage of the manure which has accumulated in some disused oxen kraal, to plant thereon a few gourds or some tobacco.

The operation of hastily tilling the fallow fields is often carried on by a *djimo* (dji-ma). Knowing that her fallows are very large and that she can hardly cope with them by herself, the owner calls all her neighbours to a djimo, viz., a working party, having wisely prepared a number of large jugs of beer. Neighbours will certainly accept the invitation as they may have to ask for similar help later on. So they come in the morning, and attack the fields with energy, singing and shouting all the time. There are special djimo songs, in particular amongst the Ba-Sutho. One may see them, some fifty black bodies toiling vigorously, 241 476 574 [533]

241 making the sand fly, their hoes working with marvellous rapidity!
476 What excitement, what strenuous work, each one urging the
574 other to still greater exertion and all hurrying to finish the job! They know that, there in the hut, ten big jars of beer brewed to a nicety wait for them, and that they will have a good time at midday, when the heat will be unbearable and the work done.

241 The maize grows and the weeds grow with it ; after the tilling
221 comes the *weeding* ; this is the work for November, December and January.

It is done twice or thrice for the mealies. The first weeding is called *tjutja*, and is done when the mealie stems have reached a height of about one foot. The second is called *hlakula*. By this time the ground nuts and beans have grown, and this weeding is intended to be for their benefit also.

In January it is the *nwebo*, the time for the first ears of maize to ripen : it is also at that time that the fields of maize are apt to be ravaged by a species of coleoptera, called the *nunu*, of which I shall have more to say when treating of the superstitions of the tribe.

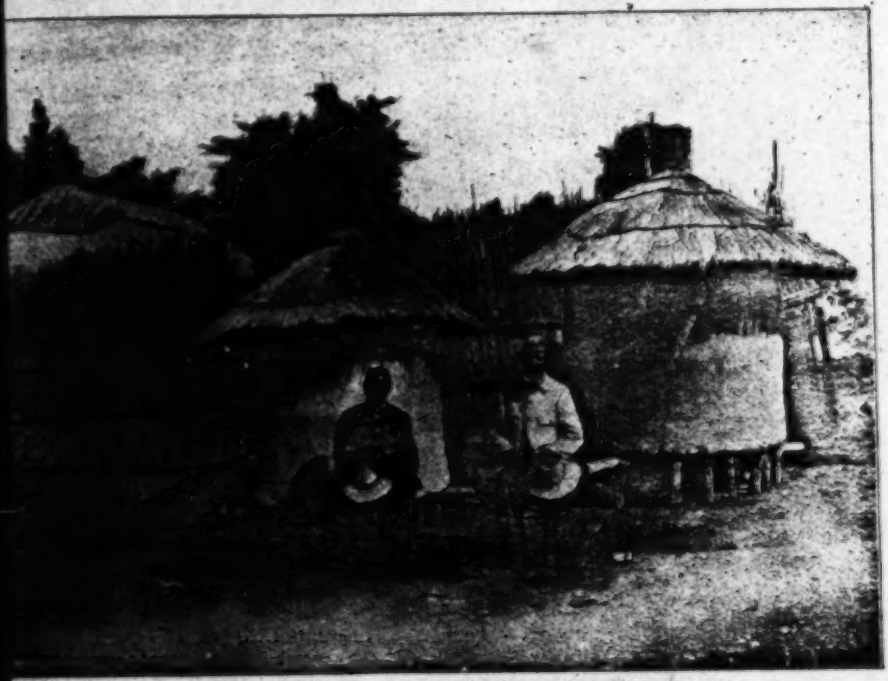
In January also the sorghum and millet attain their full growth, and the grain begins to form. *Sparrows*, *finches*, and other chattering birds take up their residence in the fields and begin to plunder them. Then women and children camp out from morning to night, in their plantations, and spend three whole months shouting, yelling and making a most infernal hullabaloo, with tin cans and other musical instruments, in their endeavour to scare the thieves. This is what they call *psaya* or *rindja tinyanyana*. The flocks of sparrows, etc., move on at a single flight to the acacias or mimosas, close by, whence they make a descent on the fields of the next neighbour. This proprietress is also on guard, and, in her turn, drives off the birds with a frightful uproar ; thus the duel between birds and human beings goes on for weeks. The mother and children prevail upon the father to build them a little hut (ntjonga, mu-mi) right in the middle of the field, to enable them to protect their sorghum against the feathered enemy, and there they take up their quarters until the cereals have ripened and are ready to be harvested.

to be harvested. Poor cereals! Many grains are wanting! 241
Those mischievous sparrows have taken more than a tithe! In 417
the marshy lands of Lebombo I noticed the people scaring the birds in a somewhat original manner. A cord was stretched right across the field, for a distance of at least thirty or forty yards, supported at intervals by poles, and on it were strung large snail shells (Achatina lamarkiana) as big as one's fist; when the watchers heard the sparrows chirping on the other side of the field, instead of getting up and running after them, yelling and shouting to scare them away, they merely pulled the cord, which made the shells jingle against one another, the movement and noise frightening the birds and sending them off to attack the crops of some less ingenious neighbour! I have also seen scarecrows set up in some places, the ordinary stuffed figure. During these months of bird scaring it is impossible to get the caretakers to do anything but guard their plantations! The little maidservants scamper away to join in the work and the Christian girls no longer come to school! I can well imagine that the husbands often find empty larders at home!

The attraction of the plantation does not however hinder the 273
labourers from doing full justice to the national beer, the bukanye, which is consumed from the middle of January to the end of February! Besides, it is principally after the bukanye that it is necessary to protect the sorghum from the beaks of these winged destroyers.

The agricultural year ends with the *harvest*. Every one 241
harvests his own fields and keeps, as far as possible, his product 221
separate in his own store house. The ears of maize which have been left to dry on the stalks are broken off (tshobela) and are carefully piled in conical baskets in such a manner as to make them hold large quantities. The precious burden is at once deposited in the storehouse. After this the beans are picked (khaya): these do not ripen much before May, after all the other produce, at a season which is called "the time of beans" (nkama wa timbawen). The ground-nuts are unearthed by 241
pounding on the ground all round the stem, and pulling up the whole plant by the roots. It is curious to see the stalks coming

grains. The best have been preserved for seed. When the threshing is finished, the grains are collected (wolela or hlakula) in the *lihlelo* basket and winnowed (hehera). Kafir corn and sorghum are then stored in the big *ngula* basket (1). As regards maize, it is kept in the storehouses proper (shitlanta),



Dula storehuts in the Shiluvane village *Phot. H. A. Junod.*
(The man sitting on the right is Viguet, my faithful informant).

little huts built of reeds with a moveable roof and raised on piles. All the shitlanta belong to the husband, though most of the tilling and all the weeding has been done by the wife, as already explained (I. p. 337). In the Transvaal, beans, peas and ground nuts are packed in the *dula* (dji-ma), which are smeared outside with clay,

(1) It is taboo to weave the *ngula* before harvest, just as it is to prepare the ntsho before the birth of the baby. Before harvest Kafir corn is still *nyimba*, viz., a child not yet born. Who knows if the hail or the locusts will not destroy it? Wait till you have harvested, then you will see what size your basket must be!